

SMALLPOX

What is smallpox?

Smallpox is a serious infectious disease that no longer occurs anywhere in the world. It was caused by a virus called variola. The last naturally acquired case in the world occurred in 1977. Since smallpox has been eliminated from all countries, a single case would be considered an international public health emergency.

How was smallpox spread?

By close contact with the respiratory discharges of a person with the disease or contact with objects contaminated by an ill individual.

What were the symptoms of smallpox?

The symptoms of smallpox started with chills, high fever, headache, joint and muscle pains (especially backache), nausea and vomiting. The classic smallpox skin rash appeared several days after the other symptoms. The skin rash became raised and then pus-filled. The pustules ruptured, then dried and crusted over. The rash was painful, most dense on the face, arms, and legs, and caused severe itching and burning. Many people who had this disease died from it, and it left permanent scars on many who survived. Some milder forms of smallpox also occurred.

How soon after exposure did symptoms appear?

The symptoms appeared from 8-16 days after the exposure, with an average of 10-12 days.

How long could an infected person spread smallpox?

Infected persons spread the disease until all of the crusts had dropped off the skin and disappeared. This usually happened by about two weeks after the rash began. Smallpox was considered a highly communicable disease, meaning that it was easily spread from one person to another. After having this disease, a person could not get it again.

How was it diagnosed?

Smallpox was diagnosed by various laboratory tests that detected the virus.

What was the treatment for smallpox?

Patients with this disease were usually hospitalized, but there was no specific treatment for it. Treatment included keeping the patient as comfortable as possible by keeping the skin clean, trying to control the itching, and relieving the pain and other symptoms as much as possible. Antibiotics were used only if bacterial infections developed as a complication.

How could smallpox be prevented?

Smallpox has been eradicated because the vaccine was effective and used widely to prevent cases. Isolation of persons with disease, appropriate disinfection of articles that came in contact with patients, and vaccination of contacts helped prevent the spread to others. Today, samples of the virus are held under tight security in only two research laboratories in the worlds.

